

## Frank Tejeda

### 1945–1997

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE 1993–1997  
DEMOCRAT FROM TEXAS

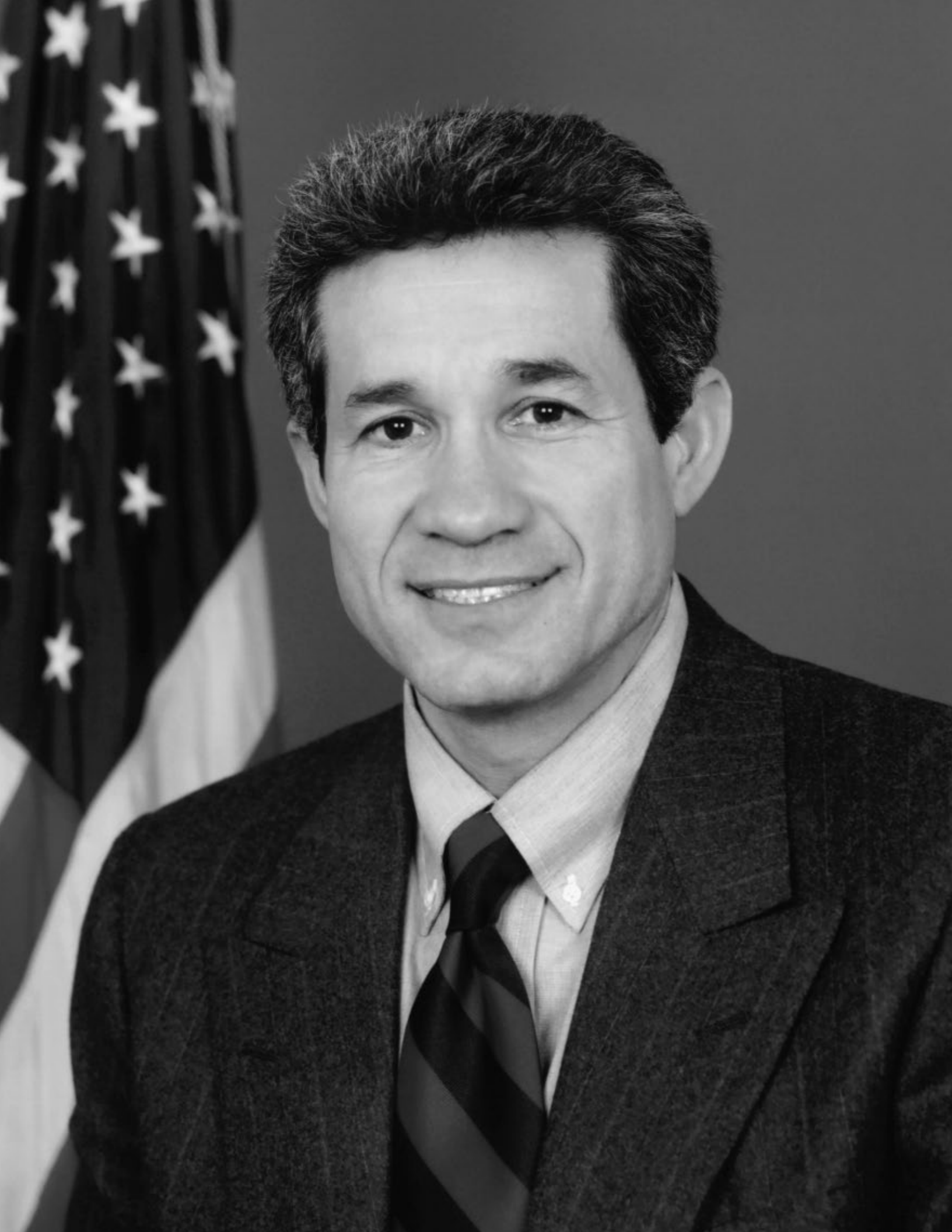
Frank Tejeda served slightly more than two terms as a Texas Representative in the U.S. House before his life was cut short by a severe illness. Tejeda was a decorated U.S. Marine with a long and influential career in the Texas state legislature when he arrived in Washington. Tejeda's military service, in which he specialized in national security, greatly influenced his career in politics. His humble beginnings led to his desire to improve conditions in his majority-Hispanic district. "His story is very much the American story, about the ingenuity and creativity of one man's rise from obscurity to power," said Representative Solomon Ortiz of Texas after his colleague died in 1997.<sup>1</sup>

Frank Mariano Tejeda was born in San Antonio, Texas, on October 2, 1945, to Frank Tejeda, Sr., a disabled veteran of World War II, and Lillie Tejeda, a housekeeper and an employee of a local beauty shop.<sup>2</sup> Tejeda attended St. Leo's Catholic School and then Harlandale High School, a public school in San Antonio's South Side. In 1963, at age 17, he dropped out of school and joined the Marine Corps.<sup>3</sup> This "was probably the turning point in my life," Tejeda reflected later.<sup>4</sup> His valiant tour of duty in Vietnam earned him a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart. "I was a grunt, and proud of it," Tejeda recalled. "I wouldn't have it any other way."<sup>5</sup> He credited his Marine service and guidance from his parents as the primary factors that helped him overcome a difficult childhood in an impoverished neighborhood. "They always instilled in me that many people can deprive you of many things ... but you can never be deprived of an education," Tejeda said of his parents.<sup>6</sup> Heeding their advice, Tejeda attained his high school equivalency degree while serving in the Marines; upon his return to San Antonio in 1967, he enrolled at St. Mary's University, graduating with a B.A. in 1970. Tejeda went on to law school at the University of California at

Berkeley, receiving his J.D. in 1974. He returned to San Antonio after law school to work as an attorney, remaining in the Marine Reserves and eventually earning the rank of major. Tejeda married Cecelia Gaitan; the couple had three children, Marissa, Sonya, and Frank III, before divorcing.<sup>7</sup>

In 1976, at age 31, Tejeda won a seat in the Texas state house of representatives in a district that included the South Side of San Antonio. "I'd see the streets that never got repaired, the poor drainage," Tejeda said, explaining why he ran for political office. "I'd see other people get things done because they had influence. I got involved because it was the only way, I felt, to get things done."<sup>8</sup> Auguring the bipartisan support he enjoyed throughout his career, his first campaign contribution from outside his family came from Lamar Smith, who chaired the Bexar County Republican Party before joining Tejeda in the U.S. House.<sup>9</sup> Tejeda spent a decade in the Texas house before advancing to the state senate. While serving in the legislature, Tejeda continued working as a lawyer and pursued two advanced degrees. In 1980 he obtained a Master's of Public Administration degree from Harvard, and in 1989 he earned an LL.M. degree from Yale.

In the state legislature, Tejeda developed a reputation as a dedicated and tenacious public servant. Tejeda pledged to "serve all the people and all groups and to serve the South Side to the best of my ability," and his concern for his constituents contributed to his solid voting base and popularity.<sup>10</sup> He also cultivated alliances with politicians from San Antonio's South Side and emerged as a leader of a formidable political coalition with a strong grass-roots base aimed at reform and community activism.<sup>11</sup> Tejeda rejected criticism that the association he helped create resembled a political machine. "It's just a group of people concerned about how people live," he said. "There's no formal meetings, no divvying up of political spoils. We talk with



each other about problems and keep each other honest to a commitment to the South Side.”<sup>12</sup> During his 16 years in the Texas house and senate, Tejeda attempted to boost state aid for women- and minority-owned businesses, sought to provide housing for veterans, and backed increased government protection of voting rights for minority groups. Tejeda also championed worker’s compensation reform, leading to a direct confrontation with the state’s trial lawyers, who were unhappy about new arbitration guidelines that prevented civil law suits.<sup>13</sup> In 1990 Texas attorneys groups helped finance a primary challenger against Tejeda, but he ultimately prevailed with more than three-quarters of the vote.<sup>14</sup>

Texas gained three U.S. congressional seats as a result of reapportionment after the 1990 Census; a high rate of population growth ensured that at least one new seat would come from heavily Hispanic South Texas. The newly created district, anchored in Bexar County, included Tejeda’s political base in the Harlandale neighborhood as well as Republican-leaning northeastern San Antonio, which was mostly white and middle class. The district stretched south from San Antonio to a predominantly Hispanic region of Texas on the Mexican border with a high unemployment rate and many residents below the poverty line.<sup>15</sup> The seasoned Texas politician faced no opposition from his own party or from the Republicans when he declared his intent to run for the House in the 1992 elections, demonstrating his political strength. With no major-party contenders, Tejeda’s campaign focused less on specific policy topics than on his style of governing. “My message is that I’m a hard worker, I’m a caring and compassionate individual,” Tejeda noted. “And I will listen. I’m here to serve the people, not to dictate.”<sup>16</sup> In the November election, Tejeda squared off against Libertarian Party candidate David Slatter, a field service engineer.<sup>17</sup> Tejeda easily defeated Slatter, earning 87 percent of the vote. Although the national and state political environments diverged from the Democratic Party in the 1994 midterm elections, Tejeda sailed to victory. The Republicans nominated Slatter. The incumbent prevailed by more than 45,000 votes, capturing 71 percent of the final tally.<sup>18</sup>

Reflecting his personal background and his interest in national security policy, Tejeda received assignments to the Armed Services and Veterans’ Affairs Committees. During his short tenure in the House, Tejeda focused much of his attention on the military and veterans. In 1993 he enthusiastically backed increased disability compensation for veterans, their dependents, and surviving family members. “We owe a tremendous debt to those disabled veterans who stood the long watches and sacrificed for our Nation’s defense,” Tejeda reminded his House colleagues.<sup>19</sup> During the 103rd Congress (1993–1995) and again in the 104th Congress (1995–1997), the Texas Representative introduced legislation to increase educational assistance and opportunities for veterans.

A lifelong Democrat, Tejeda earned a reputation as an independent thinker. Though a strong supporter of increased federal funding for education and initiatives to combat poverty, he also opposed gun control and military budget cuts.<sup>20</sup> Asked if he thought his positions aligned better with those of the Republican Party, Tejeda responded, “I didn’t go to Washington to march in lockstep with the president or the party.”<sup>21</sup> While in the House, Tejeda did break from the Democratic majority and Democratic President William J. (Bill) Clinton on certain issues. He voted against President Clinton’s highly publicized crime bill and against the Brady Bill, which restricted the purchase of handguns. In 1993 he came out against “Don’t ask, don’t tell,” the President’s proposal to allow gays and lesbians to serve in the military provided they did not reveal their sexual orientation. “I don’t know if anything would be changed,” Tejeda commented. “My bottom line is looking at military effectiveness.”<sup>22</sup>

Preferring to work behind the scenes and out of the limelight, Tejeda had a reserved personality and a strong work ethic that complemented his focus on constituent service, the hallmark of his tenure in Congress. As a Representative, he often worked on routine affairs for his constituents, such as sorting out their problems with Social Security or Veterans Administration benefits. “You know that you’ve helped someone,” he explained. “And you know that in the long run it will be politically helpful, too.”<sup>23</sup>

Tejeda rarely made speeches on the House Floor, adopting a more vocal role in the House only when he believed it would benefit his district. During his first term, for example, he made an impassioned plea to his colleagues to vote in favor of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). “If we do not take advantage of this tremendous opportunity, Japan and the European Economic Community certainly will,” Tejeda said. “Let us not slam the window shut on our children’s economic futures.”<sup>24</sup> Tejeda’s vote in favor of NAFTA reflected his belief that the agreement would open up economic opportunities for his district, which hugged the Mexican border.<sup>25</sup>

During his second term in the House, Tejeda focused on a matter that was of great importance to his district and to the state of Texas. By the 1990s, San Antonio’s Kelly Air Force Base, which dated from World War I, was the Air Force’s oldest continuously active air field.<sup>26</sup> It also had developed into a crucial component of San Antonio’s economy. The largest single-site employer in Tejeda’s job-starved district, it helped build San Antonio’s Hispanic middle class.<sup>27</sup> When Tejeda first entered the House, Kelly employed half the Hispanics in the air force.<sup>28</sup> As the Cold War wound down, hopes for a “peace dividend” led Congress to create the Base Realignment and Closure Commission (BRAC). The purpose of the commission was to provide an “objective, non-partisan, and independent review and analysis” of Department of Defense recommendations of military bases that could be consolidated or closed without compromising national security. Congress could reject the BRAC list by passing a resolution of disapproval but could not modify the recommendations.<sup>29</sup> Kelly Air Force Base had survived three BRAC cuts, but the 1995 list recommended its closure, since San Antonio had five military bases. Joined by colleagues from California, which also had several bases on the 1995 BRAC list, Tejeda launched a long-shot effort to persuade Congress to reject the BRAC recommendations. He received little support, however, and on July 26, 1995, by a 43 to 10 tally, the National Security Committee (later named the Armed Services Committee) rejected Tejeda’s motion to disapprove of the

BRAC recommendations.<sup>30</sup> Despite the defeat, Tejeda carried his fight to the House Floor, where he contended that the commission had overlooked significant security and economic concerns. “I have no illusions about the final outcome of this matter,” Tejeda admitted. “It is the bottom of the ninth and we are behind by a lot of runs. But this does not mean we give up and walk off the field.”<sup>31</sup> On September 8, 1995, the House rebuffed Tejeda’s resolution to set aside the BRAC recommendations by a vote of 343 to 75. “It’s over,” Tejeda conceded after the vote. “We’ll take the lemons that have been handed to us and make some outstanding lemonade.”<sup>32</sup> The Congressman moved on to explore ways of privatizing the base’s operations, hoping to preserve as many local jobs as possible.<sup>33</sup>

Tejeda’s attempt to save Kelly Air Force Base was his last significant political venture. After experiencing severe headaches in the fall of 1995, Tejeda went for a medical checkup; doctors discovered a malignant brain tumor. In October 1995, surgeons removed 90 percent of the tumor but could not reach the remainder, which was lodged in Tejeda’s left temporal lobe. Doctors told the 50-year-old Tejeda that he would need at least six weeks to recuperate, but he returned to the House Floor only two weeks after surgery, just before a roll call vote on a Republican proposal to reduce Medicare funding. House Majority Whip Tom DeLay of Texas interrupted the proceedings to acknowledge Tejeda’s presence, and his colleagues cheered.<sup>34</sup>

Though Tejeda resumed a normal schedule for most of 1996, during the fall campaign for his third term in the House his health deteriorated. Speaking and completing his thoughts became increasingly difficult. “If you’ve heard me speak recently, you may have noticed a few changes,” he said. “I know exactly what I want to say, but the words just don’t come out like I want.”<sup>35</sup> Despite the setback, Tejeda easily defeated his opponents, Republican Mark Cude, a local businessman, and third-party candidate Clifford Finley—with 75 percent of the vote—for a seat in the 105th Congress (1997–1999).<sup>36</sup>

In December 1996, Tejeda’s doctors discovered that his brain tumor had metastasized; surgery was impossible. Since Tejeda’s poor health prevented him from traveling

to Washington for the beginning of the 105th Congress, the House allowed a judge in San Antonio to swear him in for a third term.<sup>37</sup> “I’ll do my best to recuperate quickly and join my colleagues in the House chamber,” Tejeda promised in a statement. “The Marine in me intends to attack this thing with full vigor.”<sup>38</sup> But the cancer had spread, and 17 months after his initial diagnosis, Tejeda passed away in San Antonio on January 30, 1997, at age 51. The next day, Navy Secretary John Dalton announced that Tejeda would be posthumously awarded the Silver Star for his efforts to save a wounded Marine in Vietnam. “What made Frank special was his quiet and unpretentious manner despite his distinguished accomplishments,” New Mexico Congressman Bill Richardson said upon hearing of his colleague’s death.<sup>39</sup> President Clinton also reflected on the Texas Representative’s passing: “He endeared himself to all who knew him, always looking out for the best interests of his constituents, members of the military, and the Hispanic and veterans’ communities in particular.”<sup>40</sup> Tejeda was buried with full military honors at the Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery in San Antonio, Texas.<sup>41</sup>

## FOR FURTHER READING

*Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, “Frank Tejeda,” <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.

## MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

**University of Oklahoma, The Julian P. Kanter Political Commercial Archive, Department of Communication** (Norman). *Videocassette*: 1990, two commercials on one videocassette. The Democratic Party commercials were used during Frank Tejeda’s campaign for a 1990 state senatorial election in Texas.

**University of Texas at Austin, Briscoe Center for American History.** *Papers*: Lawrence C. Pope Collection, 1961–1989, 90 feet. Persons represented include Frank Tejeda.

**University of Texas at San Antonio, Archives and Special Collections.** *Papers*: Cyndi Taylor Krier Papers, 1956–2002, 176.4 linear feet, and the San Antonio Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Records, 1931–2008, 66.7 linear feet. Persons represented include Frank Tejeda.

## NOTES

- 1 *Congressional Record*, 105th Cong., 1st sess. (4 February 1997): 1384.
- 2 Carol J. Castaneda, “Texan Is a Sure Shot for Congress,” 17 March 1992, *USA Today*: 2A; David McLemore, “U.S. Rep. Frank Tejeda of San Antonio Dies at 51,” 31 January 1997, *Dallas Morning News*: 24A.
- 3 Several sources indicate that Tejeda was expelled from high school. See McLemore, “U.S. Rep. Frank Tejeda of San Antonio Dies at 51.”
- 4 McLemore, “U.S. Rep. Frank Tejeda of San Antonio Dies at 51.”
- 5 Benjamin Sheffner, “Rep. Frank Tejeda Dies at Age 51”; Special Election Expected in March,” 3 February 1997, *Roll Call*.
- 6 Castaneda, “Texan Is a Sure Shot for Congress.”
- 7 *Congressional Directory*, 104th Congress (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1996): 273; Ben R. Guttery, *Representing Texas: A Comprehensive History of U.S. and Confederate Senators and Representatives from Texas* (Austin, TX: Eakin Press, 2008): 146.
- 8 Ron Hutcheson, “San Antonio Representative Battling against Brain Tumor,” 12 January 1997, *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*: 2.
- 9 *Congressional Record*, 105th Cong., 1st sess. (4 February 1997): 1384.
- 10 “Congressman Frank Tejeda Dead at 51,” 31 January 1997, *Houston Chronicle*: 27.
- 11 Robert McG. Thomas, Jr., “Frank Tejeda, 51, Congressman from Texas and Former Marine,” 2 February 1997, *New York Times*: 39; Bruce Davidson, “Tejeda Death Imperils South Side Coalition,” 2 February 1997, *San Antonio Express-News*: 1A.
- 12 McLemore, “U.S. Rep. Frank Tejeda of San Antonio Dies at 51.”
- 13 *Politics in America, 1994* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1993): 1531.
- 14 Scott Pendelton, “Frank Tejeda: A Candidate Who Sidesteps Stereotypes,” 4 February 1992, *Christian Science Monitor*: 7.
- 15 “Presenting the First Freshman of Class of 1993: Texas Democrat Frank Tejeda,” 26 January 1992, *Roll Call*. According to several sources, while serving in the Texas state senate, Frank Tejeda helped to draw the lines for the district he would later represent in the U.S. House. See “Congressman Frank Tejeda Dead at 51.”
- 16 Pendelton, “Frank Tejeda: A Candidate Who Sidesteps Stereotypes.”
- 17 *Politics in America, 1996* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1995): 1322.
- 18 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>.
- 19 *Congressional Record*, House, 103rd Cong, 1st sess. (27 April 1993): 8277.



- 20 McLemore, "U.S. Rep. Frank Tejeda of San Antonio Dies at 51."
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 William Clayton, Jr., "Far from Consensus on Military Gay Ban; Both Sides Inflexible as Ever on Issue," 13 May 1993, *Houston Chronicle*: 9A; *Politics in America*, 1996: 1322.
- 23 George Rodrigue, "Taking Constituent Service Seriously; Helping the Folks Back Home Can Transcend Party Politics, Texans Find," 14 December 1995, *Dallas Morning News*: 33A.
- 24 *Congressional Record*, House, 103rd Cong., 1st sess. (9 November 1993): 27967.
- 25 Jonathan Moore, "Hispanics in Congress Begin to Find Their Voice," 15 March 1992, *Houston Chronicle*: 28A; *Almanac of American Politics*, 1996 (Washington, D.C.: National Journal Inc., 1995): 1334.
- 26 "Kelly AFB, Texas," <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/facility/kelly.htm> (accessed 25 July 2012).
- 27 "Base Privatization Review Urged," 11 February 1996, *San Antonio Express-News*: B1.
- 28 *Politics in America*, 1994 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1993): 1532.
- 29 "Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission," <http://www.brac.gov/index.html> (accessed 13 February 2012).
- 30 "Panel OK's Military Base Closing List," 27 July 1995, *Morning Call* (Allentown, PA): A3.
- 31 *Congressional Record*, House, 104th Cong., 1st sess. (8 September 1995): 24130.
- 32 "House OK's Shutting Down 79 Bases, Including Kelly," 9 September 1995, *Dallas Morning News*: 7A.
- 33 "Base Privatization Review Urged."
- 34 "Surgery Can't Stop Tejeda from Voting," 20 October 1995, *Dallas Morning News*: 6A.
- 35 "Lawmaker's Speech Worsens as Tumor Grows," 4 January 1997, *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*: 8; Ken Dilanian, "Tejeda to Miss Swearing-In after Fall at S. Side Home," 6 January 1997, *San Antonio Express-News*: A1.
- 36 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>; Thaddeus Herrick, "Even in Death, Tejeda's Influence Dominates," 9 March 1997, *Houston Chronicle*: 1.
- 37 On January 8, 1997, U.S. District Judge Orlando Garcia swore Tejeda in as a Member of the 105th Congress. The private ceremony took place in a San Antonio hospital. Bruce Davidson, "Ailing Tejeda Takes Oath," 9 January 1997, *Houston Chronicle*: 24; Bruce Davidson, "Tejeda Returns Home from Stay in Hospital," 10 January 1997, *San Antonio Express-News*: 8B.
- 38 McLemore, "U.S. Rep. Frank Tejeda of San Antonio Dies at 51."
- 39 *Congressional Record*, House, 105th Cong., 1st sess. (4 February 1997): 1378.
- 40 "Peers Mourn San Antonio Congressman," 1 February 1997, *Fort Worth-Telegram*: 10.
- 41 David McLemore, "Tejeda Mourned; San Antonio Lawmaker's Services Draw Thousands," 4 February 1997, *Dallas Morning News*: 17A.